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## EDDIC NOTES

### I

*Hamthismol*\* st. 4.

On earth I am lonely  
like to asp in holt,  
amidst foes unfriended  
like fir stripped of boughs,  
of gladness bereft  
as the greenwood of leaves  
when the waster-of-twigs  
on a warm day cometh.

Thus sorroweth Guthrun, after having lost her husband Sigurth, her brothers Gunnar and Hogni, and having slain her second husband Atli and her two sons by that union,—in anticipation of the death of her sons by Ionakr, Hamthir and Sorli, whom she sends forth on the foredoomed errand to avenge her daughter Svanhild.

As is well known, the similes in the Edda are few and far between. It is therefore to be taken for granted that those which do occur ought to be telling and perfectly clear to the hearer. In other words, that the illustration they afford be as *geläufig* to an old Norse audience as were the Homeric similes to the Greek. Hence it behooves us to bend our efforts toward bringing home their meaning and import also to the modern mind; for a greater gap, we know, exists in mode of thought between the present and Old Norse times than between the present and Homeric times.

In Guthrun's monologue three similes of similar import convey her sense of bereavement:

1) she is lonely like the asp in the holt (namely, of evergreens, as Bugge plausibly suggested);<sup>1</sup>

2) She is unfriended amidst foes, or without kinsmen, like a fir stripped of its boughs;

3) she is of gladness bereft as the greenwood of leaves.

\* The acute accent over *q* has been omitted thruout this article because of the printer's failure to procure this particular character in time for this publication.—*Editor*.

<sup>1</sup> *Zfdphil.* 7, 387.

The first of these comparisons we moderns may, at a pinch, comprehend and even appreciate—the graceful, slender aspen tree with its delicate, trembling leaves, its light-colored upright trunk surrounded by the sombre, soughing forest of evergreens. It agrees, too, with a typical Scandinavian forest scene. The fem. adj. *einstöð* (ἑπαξ λεγ.) ‘standing alone’ also well fits both figure and fact. And the simile as a whole is paralleled by the equally well known stanza in the *Hqvamöl* (49):

The fir-tree dies  
in the field that stands;  
shields it nor bark nor bast.

There is some question about the value of the word *holt* in this passage. I have in my translation rendered it by the homonymous English word. In this I follow most of the interpreters. However, as both Fritzner and Vigfússon inform us, *holt* means in ‘common Old and Modern Icel. usage any rough, stony hill or ridge, as opposed to marshland or the lea; whereas the meaning of ‘forest’ seems almost obsolete, even in Old Icelandic.’ Nevertheless, there seems to be no question that, for the oldest times, at any rate, the meaning of ‘forest’ is the predominating one, as indeed it is in the congeners of the related *Ide* tongues: Old Swed. and Afs. *holt*, OHG. *holz*, Greek κλάδος ‘twig,’ Old Slav. *kladá* ‘beam, timber, trunk, etc.,’ O. Ir. *cail* ‘wood.’ The older compounds *holt-skripi* ‘snake,’ *holta-þór* ‘Reynard Fox,’ *Holt-setar* ‘the people of Holsten,’ *Skóla-holt*, *Reykja-holt*—are inconclusive as to the value of the first element. *Holt-barð* ‘rim of a hill’ points to the meaning ‘ridge.’—On the other hand the compounds *eiki-holt*, *eski-holt*, *espi-holt* (‘oak-, ash-, aspen- forest’) speak a clear language. Moreover, the simplex *holt* occurs several times in the Edda in the indubitable sense of ‘forest.’—As to the compound *holtsetar* (*Hymiskviða* st. 27) it is of unknown meaning though quite confidently translated by every one as ‘forested ridge’, to suit the context.

The semasiological change in Modern Scandinavian and—sparsely—in some English, dialects is not necessarily a consequence of common lexicological antecedent. It may be a simultaneous and spontaneous one. In much the greater part of Scandinavia farmland is the result of human labor, either by clearing of the forest or the removal of rocks, or else by the drainage of swamps. Those portions which did not repay this labor, more particularly the stony hills, retained their original forest covering. In the more fertile and level portions of Scania and Denmark, on the other hand, the *holt* would remain longest on isolated morainic hills emerging from swamps. In either case the sense of ‘forest’ would soon gain the connotation of ‘rough, wild tract’; just as in German *Wald* (as e.g., in *Schwarz-, Thüringer-, Böhmer-wald*) acquired and has retained a like meaning to the present day.

Among the editors, solely Dettner-Heinzel<sup>2</sup> decide for the meaning ‘wooded

<sup>2</sup> *Kommentarband*, p. 575.

ridge'; but for the singular reason that the preposition *i* instead of *á* is used—unless, indeed, they think of a wooded, as opposed to a bare, ridge. Even so this carries no weight since in Scandinavian *i lien*, *i fjellet*, *i aasen*, *i skraaningen*, *oppe i heien* etc. is used as often, if not oftener than, *paa lien*, *paa fjellet*, *paa aasen*, *paa skraaningen*, etc.

The second comparison creates more difficulty, though I have seen no explanation offered, nor even the problem suggested. In how far is a fir-tree stripped of its boughs like one bereft of his kinsmen? Certainly, this figure demands some elucidation for the modern reader. What I offer is a mere suggestion.

The only agency which will strip a fir of its boughs is man, in search for timber or mast-tree, for which the straightness of its trunk and its comparative freeness from knots make the fir admirably fitted. Stripped of its boughs, naked and bare, exposed to wind and weather, as mast-tree of the old one-masted ship, a fir-tree might to Old Norse listeners stand as a symbol of the lone state of a person bereft of the protection and backing of kinsmen. We must remember how much more than modern man he felt dependent on his kinsmen for recognition, honor, and happiness.<sup>3</sup> Deeper insight into this state of mind may be gained by reading Grönbech's *Lykkemand og Niding*—a book which cannot be too highly recommended for those interested in the psychology of Old Germanic Times.<sup>4</sup>

The third comparison is clear enough in its implication—the lonely person is bereft of joy, as is the greenwood (or tree) when bereft of leaves—the leaves constituting the very life and glory of it, its 'crown.'—But here the further definition: "when the waster-of-twigs on a warm day cometh" has caused much discussion. What is the meaning of "the waster-of-twigs"? What does this kenning signify?

Vigfússon<sup>5</sup> emends, rather violently: *pá es kvistu skepja*

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the expression in the *Sonartorek*: '*hoggva skar i ætt*.'—I quote a passage from the work cited below (p. 58): "(For Germanerne) er hele sammenholdet og alle mændenes kraft brudt, så snart blot een af fællerne rykkes op. Og så ligner de frænderne ved et gård, hvor stav står ved siden af stav og danner hegn om en hellig mark. Nar een af dem fælles, da er der skår i ætten, og da ligger dens mark åben for tiltrampning."

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Journ. of Engl. and Germ. Phil.*, 1910, p. 269 and 1915, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> *C. P. B.*, I, 477.

*konur um dag varman*—‘as a willow that women lop on a warm day.’ Now it is true that leaves are collected in Scandinavia, in spring and fall when fodder is scarce; but never in the ‘warm season,’ for obvious reasons. The emendation must therefore be rejected.

Similarly Bugge,<sup>6</sup> emending *vibr* to read *vibir*, that is, ‘willows,’ queries: “Ist das unbestimmte *kvistskøpa* von einem Weibe zu verstehen, das den Baum entlaubt? Die Worte würden sich dann, wie *Guthrúnarkviða* I, 18 auf die Sitte beziehen, dass man die Weidenbäume im Sommer entlaubt, um die Blätter als Futter zu benutzen.”—There are several objections to this: in the first place: is it likely that a kenning would be used to designate such a woman? To my knowledge there is no other instance of this. In the second place, the translation of the passage in the *Guthrúnarkviða* is by no means certain. Again, why should such a woman be called ‘damager of twigs’ when merely the leaves are stripped? Willow twigs are notoriously tough. Much rather, one looks for a phenomenon of nature in this kenning.

Gering in his translation of 1892 follows Vigfússon lex. in rendering the kenning by ‘sun’; but again abandons this in his *Glossar zur Edda* (1915) in favor of ‘Gewittersturm.’—As to the former, rare indeed are the times when the sun will make the leaves drop or droop, in Scandinavia. So we may dismiss this interpretation once for all. Again, thunderstorms of such violence as to strip trees of their branches are of great rarity in the North; and more especially so in the warm season.

Detter-Heinzel<sup>7</sup> compare the kennings for wind: *almsorg* (‘sorrow of elms’) and *skapi segls* (‘damager of sails’); but, again, it is hard to see how a strong wind, at least in the North, is compatible with warm weather. For that matter, a wind violent enough to strip off twigs and branches, so as to make a wood or tree sufficiently conspicuous to furnish the natural basis for a simile would be most unusual. As I see it, *almsorg* means more naturally ‘destroyer of trees’; for wind is more likely to fell the whole tree than to strip it of branches.

<sup>6</sup> *Norræn Fornkvæði*, p. 316, and loc. cit. supra.

<sup>7</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 575.

Another agency which may damage branches is fire; and this seems to me the most natural rendering of the kenning—so natural that it is strange that no one has thought of it. The fire or conflagration started in the forest on a warm day—for which we may say, the dry season—whether by man, to clear the ground, or by some natural cause, surely is not uncommon. ‘Bereft of joy as the greenwood of leaves, etc.’; for what can be a drearier and sadder sight than what is called in the American Northwoods a *brule*, where the charred and half-burned trunks loom up pitifully over the ashy, scorched ground?

Besides, there is most excellent warrant for thus translating. In one of the most telling passages of the *Völuspá* describing the doom of the gods (st. 52) we learn that *Surt*, the god of fire, comes from the South *mep sviga lævi*; i.e., ‘with the destruction of twigs,’ that is, ‘fire.’ Snorri who was in possession of still other sources of *Völuspá* paraphrases thus: “Surt rides first, and before him and after him is burning fire.”<sup>8</sup>—We do not need to look for an interpretation of Surt as the demon of volcanic fire, as did Miss Phillpotts:<sup>9</sup>—the destruction wrought by a forest fire was entirely sufficient to impress the imagination of the Norsemen so as to make fire seem one of the great and elemental destructive agencies.

In the *Helreið Brynhildar* (st. 10) we read

*Lét of sal minn / sunnanverðan  
hvað brinna / her alls víðar;*

He (i.e., Othin) made the waster of wood,  
as the welkin high,  
burn all about  
my bower to southward.

Here, then, the kenning is used of the *vafþrlogi*. (The reading of *Nornagest-páttur*, *hrottgarm alls víðar*, another kenning for fire, is found again in the *Aevidrápa* of the *Orvaroddssaga*.)

Hence, Snorri may have had any of these passages in mind when he answers his question “how should we paraphrase fire?” by: “call it brother of the wind and the sea, ruin and destruction of wood and of houses, Half’s bane, Sun of houses.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Gylfaginning*, chap. 51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ark. f. n. fil.*, 1905, 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, 26 (28).

## II

*Hymiskviða* st. 1:

Much game gathered  
the gods, of yore;  
on wassail bent  
the wands they shook,  
with blood besprent,  
for brewing kettle,  
and found that Ægir  
full many had.

Thus the first stanza of the *Hymiskviða* according to the usual interpretation. Several attempts have been made to render the last line (*fundu at Ægis / þrkost hvera*) satisfactory.

The Codex Regius, in all respects the best manuscript, has *hvera*, the Arnarnagneyan, *hveria*. The latter reading cannot be right, grammatically. It was retained nevertheless by Vigfússon. The emendation of *A.* to read *hverjan* was first proposed by Bugge, was adopted by Hildebrand, Sijmons, Gering, and has received the approval of Detter-Heinzel.

Another proposal by Bugge,<sup>11</sup> to read *þrkost vesa* (for *hvera* of the Cod. Reg.) was adopted by Grundtvig in his second edition, and by Sievers.—Still others preserve the reading of Cod. Reg.

That is, there have been proposed three possible ways of reading the line.:

1) *þrkost hverjan* (emend. from *A.*), yielding the meaning 'every abundance.'

2) keeping the reading of *R.* (*þrkost hvera*) which will, then, acc. to the editors, have to be translated 'lack,' or 'abundance, of kettles.'

3) emending *R.* to read *þrkost vesa*; when the meaning is: 'that there was an abundance.'<sup>12</sup>

As to the meaning of *þrkost*, the prefix *þr-* here is used most likely in its intensifying, rather than in its privative, sense, as in the nearly homonymous *þrkosta* (fem.) for which the meaning 'resource, means,' is safely established. Of course, we cannot be sure, cf. German *Auskunft*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ed.*, p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Granting, then, that *þrkostr* means 'abundance,' 'number' (2) which keeps to the reading of Cod. Reg. (at least in its usual interpretation) must be ruled out; for 'an abundance of kettles' makes no sense, seeing that precisely the fetching of a kettle big enough for the brewing is the object of Thor's expedition to *Hymir*. And besides, if there had been an abundance of kettles in Ægir's hall, then both the oracle of the gods and Ægir would be lying, as evidently there was none.

The emendations of both 1) and 3), however, would yield about the same sense; namely: 'they found an abundance,' or 'every abundance,' at Ægir's hall, viz., we presume, an abundance of the wherewithal to brew ale. This is no doubt a very satisfactory meaning, making good sense, and fitting admirably into the economy of the lay.

Nevertheless the attempt is worth while to defend the reading of the best MS., Cod. Reg. (from which the reading of A. differs after all only through a mistaken (?) insertion of an *i*).

As shown above, the translation 'an abundance of kettles' for this half-line is not tenable. Now, the *Hymiskvipa* both as a whole and with respect to its length, both relatively and absolutely, has more kennings than any other lay in the Edda—about 30, distributed over 40 stanzas. It has occurred to me, therefore, that in *þrkost hvera* we may have a kenning. If so, 'the abundance of the kettles' would necessarily mean the ale itself.

Now, unfortunately, Snorre in his *Skáldskaparmál*, that helpful treatise on the conventional vocabulary and phraseology of skaldship, for the guidance of young skalds, leaves us in the lurch precisely where we are in sore need of his learning. Among the multitudinous vocabulary offered for conceptions to be paraphrased, the one for ale is lacking; which is curious, seeing that he is acquainted with the *Alvíssmál* and its *heiti*.

But allowing this interpretation to be possible, we must read the beginning of the poem somewhat differently: the oracle truthfully leads the gods to Ægir's hall (where also the banquet was held which is celebrated in the *Lokasenna*). And—here my interpretation differs from the usual one—Ægir *does* have ale on hand. Only, not enough to satisfy the gods (described as '*sumblsamir*' or, ready and eager for deep potations),



and especially that redoubtable quaffer, Thor. Wherefore Thor brusquely confronts Ægir: "Thou shalt prepare a *plentiful* drink or banquet for the gods" (*þu skalt qsum / opt sumbl gǫrva*). Vengefully, the sea-god promises to do so, provided that Thor would fetch him a kettle big enough for the purpose.

It will be noticed that I translated *opt* in Thor's speech by plentiful. As early as 1877 Richert pointed out<sup>18</sup> that *opt* here, as well as *Hqvamql* 33 and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II, 17, could not mean 'often,' but 'richly, plentifully'; which has been adopted for these passages by Gering, Sijmons, and others. This rendering would seem to yield a very satisfactory meaning with reference to the interpretation above essayed.

### III

*Oddrúnargrátr* st. 26.

Then the hoofs of horses  
were heard full loud  
when Giuki's sons  
in the garth did ride;  
great Hogni's heart  
the Huns cut out,  
but in dungeon laid  
who was dear to me.

I have here substituted *angan* 'dear one' for the reading of the Codex Regius: *en i ormgarþ / annan logbu*. My reason for so doing is the flatness of the meaning. Oddrun is romantically devoted to Gunnar, in dishonor and in death. To mention Hogni, who is indifferent to her, and then to refer to her passionate lover as 'the other one,' offends even with the notoriously unromantic standard of the Edda in mind.

*Angan* 'pleasure, delight' is used twice personally, in the *Völuspá*, stanzas 22 and 53. Previously, Grundtvig in his second edition had proposed *engan* 'narrow' from the parallel passage, *Sigurðarkviða en skamma* st. 58:

'Will Atli then  
deal ill with thee:  
in (narrow) dungeon wilt  
with worms be laid.'

<sup>18</sup> *Försök* osv., Upsala, 1877, p. 21f.

(*munt i qngan / ormgarþ lagiþr*). This, however, necessitates the addition of a new subject—*hinn*; which is objectionable also, for the reason above mentioned.

Paleographically, the *n* with the long right hand stave (which often functions as a geminate) is not very different from a *g* with a faint curve to the left below the line.

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